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SCIENTISTS AT UM BIOLOGICAL STATION STUDY FLATHEAD LAKE SWIMMERS' ITCH

MISSOULA --

Two researchers based this summer at The University of Montana Flathead Lake Biological Station are studying the bane of many water lovers' existence: swimmers' itch.

Biology Assistant Professor Craig Spencer and biology student Brent Loken of South Dakota's Augustana College are researching the parasitic flatworms responsible for an allergic reaction in many Flathead Lake swimmers.

The organism has a complex life cycle including two hosts. The immature flatworms usually are found in snail species, while the adult parasites normally are carried by various waterfowl species.

The immature flatworms -- Cercariae -- leave their snail hosts, enter the water and search for a proper waterfowl host. This stage causes problems for people; when free-swimming cercaria come into contact with people, they burrow into their skin and die, causing an allergic skin reaction.

Often, the affected person feels a prickling sensation upon leaving the water, after which many itchy red spots appear within one to 36 hours. Each spot, resulting from penetration by a cercarial worm, may persist for a week or more and then disappear, causing the person no further problems. Some people are extremely sensitive to the parasite; others show little or no reaction.

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Spencer and Loken are collecting samples around the lake to identify the snail and waterfowl species infected with the parasite. Last summer, UM parasitologist Bill Granath identified several Flathead Lake snail species that carry the parasite.

The researchers ask the public to report cases of swimmers' itch -- including the swimming location and severity and date of infection -- to Linda Davis at the Lake County Health Office (883-6211, extension 207) or Tonya Hunter at the Flathead County Health Office (756-5633). The scientists will then collect samples at reported "hot spots."

People sometimes confuse swimmers' itch with mosquito bites. Contact dermatitis associated with drying skin after swimming can produce a red rash but doesn't have the characteristic distinct red dots of swimmers' itch.

Cases of swimmers' itch usually increase in July and August as the water warms. People wading and swimming in shallow water are more likely to encounter the parasite than those swimming in deeper offshore water, where snails are less abundant. To lower the chances of getting the ailment, swimmers should towel off right after leaving the water because they may wipe off some parasites before the organisms pierce the skin.

Funds to support this research come from Augustana College, the Flathead Lakers and the Lake County Health Department and Lake County commissioners.

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